

# Fighting the Addiction

Rhonda Fitzgerald, a 17-year-old high school student from Northfield, smoked her first cigarette at the early age of 11. By age 12, she gave up the habit for good. When Rhonda's mother saw a newspaper ad about a REBEL meeting in Atlantic City, she saw a golden opportunity for her daughter.

"I was interested in joining," says Rhonda, "because the problem of youth tobacco use is so prevalent. I was especially worried about teenagers taking their first cigarette as nonchalantly as I did." Rhonda joined the group with one simple goal: to keep at least one person from lighting up.

Rhonda's commitment to REBEL continued well beyond that first meeting. She is now the chairperson of the Atlantic County REBEL group and a member of the State's Youth Advisory Board. She plans events, leads meetings, and gives presentations and workshops to local teens.

"When I see teens smoking, I wonder how long they've been doing it, if they've developed a cough, if they're aware of the thousands of chemicals their body is being exposed to," she explains. Most of all, Rhonda wonders if these teens know how important it is to quit. "I never used to think so hard when I saw someone light a cigarette." But from her experience with REBEL, her thinking has changed... for the better!

Rhonda Fitzgerald



# Youth and School Programs

## Teen Smoking in New Jersey

We still have a long way to go in reducing teen smoking in the State. Each year, 20,100 New Jersey youths become addicted to smoking. Our most recent data indicate that by the time teens reach their senior year in high school, 17.7 percent are frequent smokers, meaning that they smoked cigarettes on at least 20 of the previous 30 days.

New Jersey teens consumed an estimated 120 million cigarettes last year – 6 million packs. Research shows that on an individual basis, the level of cigarette smoking increases dramatically by school grade. An eighth-grade student in New Jersey smokes an average of 5.4 cigarettes over a 30-day period, compared to a 12th-grader who smokes 10 times as many cigarettes, the equivalent of two-and-one-half packs in 30 days. Collectively, high school seniors smoke an average of nearly 4 million cigarettes a month.

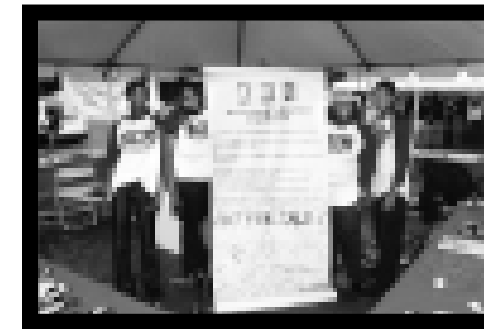
Although smoking rates for New Jersey high school students declined by 11 percent since 1999, we must continue working to bring teen smoking rates down. A goal of the U.S. Public Health Service's *Healthy People 2010* is to reduce the rate of teen smoking to 16 percent in grades nine through 12 by 2010. The good news is that, in New Jersey, smoking rates also declined for middle school students between 1999 and 2001 – by 42 percent, evidence that we are moving in the right direction.

At the national level, underage smoking rates have declined slightly after peaking in 1997, but they remain at historically high levels. Each year, more than 1 million young people become regular smokers – 3,000 a day. If this trend continues, an estimated 5 million of today's youth will die prematurely from tobacco use in the United States. Approximately 135,000 of these deaths will occur in New Jersey.

It is no coincidence that so many young people are attracted to smoking. Each year, the tobacco industry spends \$8.4 billion on national advertising and marketing to attract new smokers and to keep those who have already started. The industry spends \$247 million on advertising in New Jersey alone.

**"We have firm evidence of a direct association between tobacco marketing and smoking prevalence."** – Former CDC Director, Jeffrey P. Koplan, M.D., M.P.H.

The U.S. Surgeon General's 2001 report, *Women and Smoking*, points to an example of the impact of tobacco marketing. For more than three decades, the industry's advertising campaigns have targeted women by associating smoking with women's freedom and empowerment and by marketing cigarettes with feminine names, such as Virginia Slims,



(Top) REBEL teens unveil "Declaration of Independence from Tobacco" scroll. (Bottom) REBEL teens star in 30-second ads on Channel One.

Silva Thins, and Eve. These tactics have worked. Smoking initiation rates among girls age 14 through 17 rapidly increased as sales of the leading women's cigarette brands rose during this period.

## Empowering Teens

In 2000, we went directly to New Jersey teens to gain insight into tobacco use among this population. Primary goals were to determine the best ways to change teenagers' attitudes and behaviors regarding tobacco use and to prevent teens from ever starting to smoke. DHSS consulted with Just Kids, Inc., a nationally known full-service kids marketing agency, to conduct a series of focus groups with eighth- and 10th-graders to explore their attitudes and knowledge about tobacco use. From this research, we learned that they already know about the health effects of smoking. They know they are targets of tobacco industry advertising, but they tend to regard it as "just business." They want to make their own decisions, and they want to help friends, family, and people in their own communities.

This research helped lay the groundwork for New Jersey's Youth Anti-Tobacco Program. Taking what we learned from the teens, we employed the following concepts: that youth are profoundly affected by their community's social norms, and that they respond to the idea of a youth community-based movement that views tobacco as socially unacceptable. The program emphasized empowering teens to take charge of a youth anti-tobacco movement that they would name and lead. With this purpose in mind, DHSS held the first Statewide Youth Anti-Tobacco Summit on November 18 and 19, 2000, for teens between the ages of 14 and 17. The 340 high school teens who attended the gathering named their new movement REBEL – Reaching Everyone By Exposing Lies. The program is action-oriented and linked into the teens' own communities. Each county has a Youth Coordinator to provide support and guidance to the REBEL teens as they work to build the movement locally.

By the end of 2001, membership exceeded 7,000. REBEL has a Youth Advisory Board, an award-winning Web site, and a youth-driven magazine and newsletter. Throughout 2001, DHSS used this momentum to build a unique continuum of youth programs that includes REBEL, a middle school program called REBEL 2, and a leadership program for college-age young adults called ROCS (REBEL Official College Support Staff).

By embracing and directing young people's desire to take charge in their own communities to end tobacco use, and by giving them a community-based outlet for their actions, the CTC youth component has captured the whole range of teens and young adults from age 12 to 24. We have created an extended program that empowers our young people to work

# Youth and School Programs



More than 6,000 New Jersey teens have signed “Declaration of Independence from Tobacco” boards.



In summer 2001, specially created “Not For Sale” Interactive Display Vehicles (IDVs) traveled the State, encouraging teens to join REBEL.

toward a common goal of a smoke-free New Jersey. At the same time, their experience offers REBEL youth the opportunity to learn leadership and advocacy skills, mentor younger children, and use their powers of persuasion to influence their peers to avoid tobacco use.

New Jersey teens express their views on their own Web site, *njrebel.com*:

*I am very excited to have found njrebel.com through YM Magazine. Nothing like this is ever in NJ. This is wonderful. Is there a REBEL chapter in Union County?*  
– Lindsay, age 15

*I am highly active in smoke-free activities in my school and I think that what you people are doing is great. I'm interested in joining!*  
– Joanna, age 14

*I would like to make a difference about smoking in my county/town. Can you give me suggestions on what to do?*  
– Sarah, age 13

### Encouraging Results from Other States' Youth Movements

Experience shows that states with strong comprehensive tobacco control programs reduce smoking prevalence rates among teens.

- Massachusetts reduced smoking among high school students by 15 percent since 1995.
- California saw a 43 percent drop in teen smoking between 1995 and 1999.
- In two years, Florida reduced smoking among middle school students by 40 percent and among high school students by 10 percent.
- In three years, Mississippi reduced smoking among middle school students by 21 percent and among high school students by 10 percent.

DHSS and its partners have worked hard to reduce the prevalence rates of smoking among teens. The *2001 New Jersey Youth Tobacco Survey* shows that tobacco use among New Jersey teens has declined in the past two years.

- Between 1999 and 2001, New Jersey reduced smoking among middle school students by 42 percent and among high school students by 11 percent. (see figure 1)
- Between 1999 and 2001, the prevalence of use of any tobacco products (cigarettes, cigars, smokeless tobacco and bidis) declined by 38 percent among middle school students and 14 percent among high school students in New Jersey. (see figure 2)



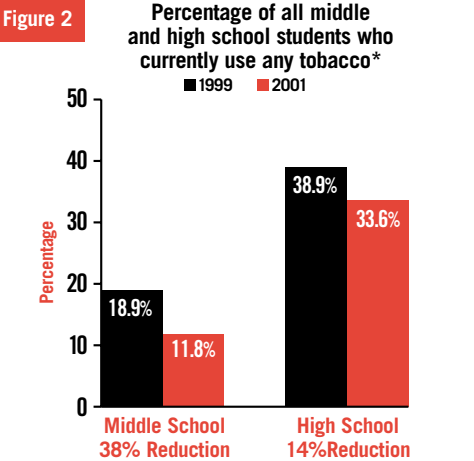
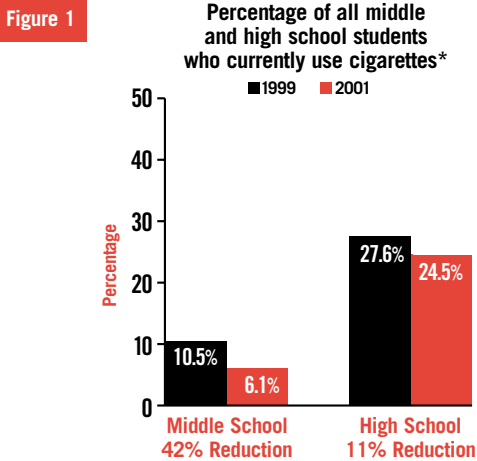
Devin Silva

## A Rebel at Heart

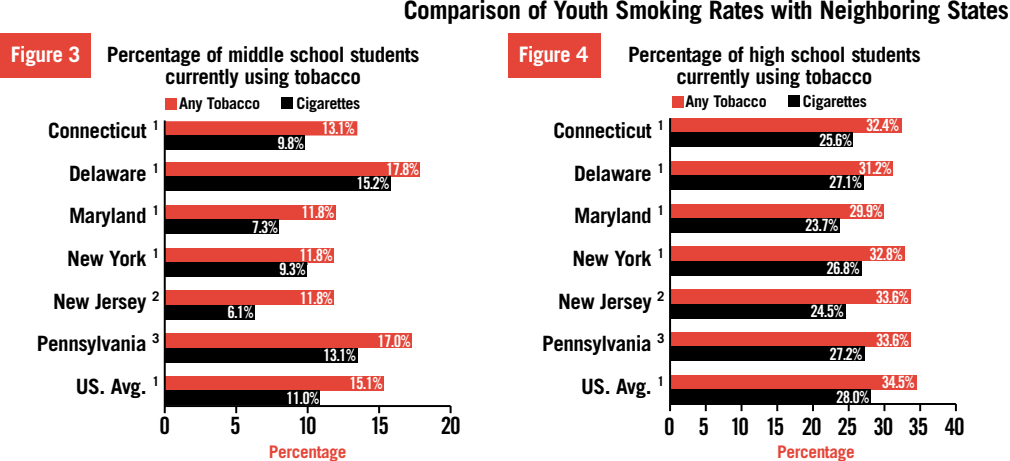
After growing up in a smoke-filled home, Devin Silva, an 18-year-old high school student from Fair Lawn, knew that smoking wasn't for him. “Being exposed to the smell and seeing family members constantly coughing was enough to satisfy any curiosity I had about cigarettes,” he explains.

Silva learned about REBEL during a Communities Against Tobacco youth summit. He's been an anti-tobacco advocate ever since. “My mother has smoked all her adult life, and my brother began seven years ago. Both made many efforts to quit, without success.” His personal commitment to REBEL, however, has inspired them to try to kick their habits.

A natural teacher, Devin brings the REBEL message about the dangers of tobacco use to children at local day camps and to middle school students at REBEL-led workshops. What has he learned in the process? “It's a great feeling to make a positive difference in someone's life.”



\*Source: New Jersey Youth Tobacco Survey, 1999-2001



New Jersey prevalence rates for middle and high school are shown in relation to neighboring states. Data from the *National Youth Tobacco Survey* for CT, DE, MD, NY and US were collected in 2000. Data from the NJ-YTS and the PA-YTS were collected in 2001. Note: All states shown except NJ included grades 6-12. NJ surveys only grades 7-12.

<sup>1</sup>Source: Youth Tobacco Surveillance – United States, 2000 MMWR 2001; 50 (No.SS-4) <sup>2</sup>Source: 2001 New Jersey Youth Tobacco Survey (NJ-YTS) <sup>3</sup>Source: 2001 Pennsylvania Youth Tobacco Survey (PA-YTS)